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SUBJECT: KING KHALID UNIVERSITY IN ASIR: FEMALE STUDENT BODY,
CHANGING CURRICULUM, EXPANDING POTENTIAL FOR U.S. EDUCATIONAL
EXCHANGE

REF: JEDDAH 228

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) During Charge's (Ambassador Erdman) August 1 visit to King Khalid University in Asir, Deputy Rector Dr. Saeed Raffaa and Deputy Rector for Female Colleges Dr. Amer Al-Shahrani discussed the predominantly female student body, changing faculty, and revised curriculum. Charge noted the importance for Saudi economic development of expanding opportunities for women in the workforce, especially since they tend to be among the highest academic achievers. While educational development is well-funded, challenges such as teacher resistance to change and a lack of job opportunities for students slow progressive reforms. Hesitation about the U.S. visa process remains. End summary.

MOSTLY FEMALE STUDENT BODY

¶2. (SBU) With seventy thousand students, King Khalid University is one of the largest higher education institutions in the Kingdom. It boasts 44 colleges in a variety of fields, including medicine, dentistry, arts, engineering, and computer science. The university's facilities are scattered across five cities up to 200 kilometers from Abha. Two-thirds of the student body are female because male students travel to Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dhahran for university, while females stay close to home due to social restrictions, according to Deputy Rector Raffaa.

¶3. (SBU) Deputy Rector Al-Shahrani said female students generally study English, the arts, and science, although they are increasingly interested in new fields like computer engineering and interior design. He also noted that female students increasingly choose fields of study with greater employment potential including accounting, business administration, and nursing. Charge emphasized the important role women play in development, and the need for their skills in the workplace. He cited a recent article on exam results in Medina, where 57 percent of students who received between 95 and 100 percent on the exam were women. If this result is at all representative of the country as a whole, it means that excluding women from the workplace not only deprives the Kingdom of half its human talent, but of the talents of the most academically successful elements in society. Looking directly at the male head of the women's colleges, Charge pointedly noted that the true measure of his success would be when he was replaced by a woman. Al-Shahrani readily -- and with a laugh -- agreed.

CHANGING CURRICULUM, POTENTIALLY RESISTANT FACULTY

¶4. (SBU) The deputy rectors claimed that the academic curriculum, which requires four Islamic studies courses and two Arabic studies courses, has changed dramatically in the last five years, and that curricula at U.S., British, and Malaysian universities have been actively reviewed in developing King Khalid University's academic plan. Active "train the teachers" programs, according to

Al-Shahrani, are part of the process. Director of Education for Asir, Dr. Abdul Rahman Bin Fusayel, told Econoff in a separate conversation that many older faculty members resist new techniques and training. He expressed relief that an "old school" employee had recently resigned. Chairman of the English Department Dr. Adbullah Al-Melhi concurred, saying that the education sector needed to "bring in fresh blood." Asked if their university graduates had difficulty finding jobs, the deputy rectors not altogether convincingly claimed they did not.

EXPANDING U.S. EDUCATION EXCHANGES

¶15. (SBU) Cultural Affairs Officer (CAO) confirmed that Consulate Jeddah would give a presentation on visas and educational opportunities in the U.S. in the fall. Raffaa expressed interest in Post's speaker program, and the CAO said Post could organize a speaker given a 30 to 60-day lead time. Charge reassured Raffaa that the visa process had improved, noting that 50 percent of visas were issued in one week or less, and 82 percent issued in one month or less. Raffaa confessed he hesitated to apply to attend scholarly conferences in the U.S. because of the long visa processing time. He subsequently said that none of the Saudi students who applied to U.S. universities in the last two to three months had complained about the visa processing period.

COMMENT

¶16. (SBU) Educational development is moving forward, but teachers' resistance to change and a lack of post-graduation job opportunities, particularly for women, limit progress. Hesitation

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about the U.S. visa process and name checks remain, but the experiences of some recent applicants have been more encouraging. Word-of-mouth reports and Consulate Jeddah's presentation may well stimulate larger numbers of potential U.S. university applicants to apply. End comment.

ERDMAN